Awe Deprived: The Psychological, Spiritual, and Civilizational Cost of Losing Contact with Majestic Nature

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In the modern world, billions live their entire lives without ever seeing the Milky Way, climbing a mountain, or witnessing the raw splendor of a tropical coastline. This absence is not incidental—it is existential. As digital life accelerates, geopolitical anxiety deepens, and artificial environments expand, humans are increasingly deprived of contact with the natural majesty that once shaped our inner lives. This paper argues that such experiences—far from being recreational luxuries—are vital for mental health, spiritual clarity, and civilizational coherence. Drawing from psychology, theology, and cultural history, we examine the effects of "awe deprivation," a silent crisis that manifests as anxiety, narcissism, disorientation, and despair. We explore how awe traditionally functioned as an emotional and spiritual reset, and why its systematic removal from daily life undermines personal flourishing and collective purpose. Finally, we propose paths for recovery: from public policy and educational reform to spiritual sabbaths and urban design. To see again what is vast may be the first step toward healing what is fractured.

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Abstract

In an age defined by digital saturation, environmental degradation, and rising geopolitical tension, human beings are increasingly disconnected from the sources of psychological balance and spiritual orientation that once grounded civilization. Among the most vital of these sources is direct exposure to natural majesty—star-filled night skies, towering mountain ranges, and the vibrant beauty of tropical landscapes. These environments are not merely scenic; they function as existential anchors, reawakening the human sense of scale, wonder, and humility. This paper argues that such experiences are essential for maintaining mental health, cultivating moral perspective, and fostering a resilient spiritual consciousness. Drawing on contemporary psychological research, theological reflection, and historical precedent, the paper explores the consequences of awe deprivation and proposes restorative cultural, institutional, and ecological practices. Without regular contact with the grandeur of creation, we risk spiritual claustrophobia and civilizational amnesia. Restoring access to majestic nature is not a luxury—it is a necessity for human flourishing in the 21st century.

1. Introduction: A Crisis of Disconnection

Over the past century, humanity has achieved unprecedented levels of technological advancement, communication speed, and informational access. The global digital infrastructure has collapsed distances, connected minds across continents, and enabled near-instantaneous interaction. Yet alongside this remarkable connectivity, a deep and growing sense of existential alienation pervades modern life. Mental health disorders—especially anxiety, depression, and burnout—are rising across age groups and cultures. Spiritual disorientation, moral ambiguity, and a general sense of meaninglessness often accompany the data-rich yet awe-deprived environments of the contemporary world. This is the paradox of our time: we are more connected than ever before, and yet we feel more cosmically alone.

1.1 The Paradox of Global Connectivity and Existential Alienation

With a device in every pocket and a network on every surface, modern individuals live in a condition of near-permanent connection to artificial systems—yet often lack any felt connection to the world that made them. While algorithms structure our attention and social media frames our emotional vocabulary, something essential has gone missing: the ability to feel *placed* in a larger order, to encounter the sublime, to experience perspective beyond the self. In short, the loss is not informational but ontological—we know more than ever, but we no longer know where we are in the cosmos.

1.2 The Disappearance of Natural Awe from Ordinary Life

For most of human history, awe was a common experience. The night sky, unobscured by light pollution, routinely invited reflection on the mystery of the heavens. Mountains reminded the human heart of its smallness in the face of geologic time. Tropical forests and seas burst with color and sound, reminding us that life is abundant, overwhelming, and not ours to control. Today, these experiences are rare. Over 80% of Americans and one-third of the global population can no longer see the Milky Way from their homes. Urbanization, overdevelopment, and recreational confinement to screens have exiled awe to the periphery of modern life—transforming it from a birthright into a luxury.

1.3 Framing the Problem: What Has Been Lost, and Why It Matters Now

This paper contends that what has been lost is not just beauty, but the foundational human relationship to creation—a relationship that once tethered psychology to meaning, and meaning to divinity. Without regular encounters with natural majesty, we lose more than perspective; we lose part of what makes us human. At a time when algorithmic systems increasingly shape behavior, and geopolitical systems teeter toward instability, the ability to ground oneself in something larger, older, and outside human manipulation becomes an urgent psychological and spiritual necessity. Awe is not an indulgence. It is a medicine—and its absence signals a crisis that cannot be solved by more information, only by deeper perception.

2. The Psychology of Awe and Natural Beauty

The experience of awe, long considered a poetic or spiritual sentiment, is now recognized as a powerful and measurable psychological state. Defined by psychologists as the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends one's current frame of reference, awe functions as both a disruptor and restorer of the self. Unlike more common emotions such as happiness or anger, awe disorients the ego just enough to create space for expanded perception, heightened curiosity, and deeper connection. Nature—particularly in its most majestic and untamed forms—has been shown to be the most consistent and universal trigger for awe. The disappearance of such encounters from daily life, therefore, marks not just an aesthetic or cultural loss, but a neuropsychological deficit with wide-ranging effects on individual well-being and societal cohesion.

2.1 Awe as a Fundamental Emotional and Cognitive Reset

Awe has a unique psychological profile. It temporarily shrinks the ego, dampens rumination, and induces what some researchers describe as a "small self" phenomenon—a diminished focus on personal concerns coupled with an expanded sense of time and collective belonging. Neuroscientific studies suggest that awe activates parts of the brain associated with attention, emotion regulation, and social cognition. It acts as a reset button, interrupting habitual cognitive loops and opening the mind to novel frameworks and values. In this sense, awe is not merely a reaction to beauty or grandeur; it is an existential recalibration, restoring a felt relationship between the self and something more enduring than the immediate stream of concerns.

2.2 Empirical Studies on Awe, Humility, and Well-Being

A growing body of research confirms the transformative effects of awe on psychological health. Studies led by Dacher Keltner and colleagues have shown that individuals who experience awe more frequently report greater life satisfaction, increased generosity, reduced aggression, and lower levels of inflammation and stress. Awe is also associated with higher levels of humility and ethical awareness, suggesting that it may serve a regulatory function not just

within individuals but within communities. One particularly striking finding is that brief awe experiences—such as watching a nature video or standing under a large tree—can increase feelings of spirituality, purpose, and social connectedness, even when no specific religious content is involved. These outcomes are especially significant in a cultural moment characterized by rising anxiety, loneliness, and ideological rigidity.

2.3 The Unique Power of Sublime Nature to Evoke Restorative Awe

While awe can be triggered by music, art, or even profound ideas, natural landscapes remain the most potent and reliable sources. Sublime nature—starry skies, towering peaks, roaring oceans—offers non-narrative, non-verbal immersion in scale, power, and beauty. These experiences are difficult to reduce to language or ideology, which makes them uniquely resistant to manipulation and powerfully healing in a media-saturated world. Unlike social media feeds or entertainment stimuli, which often simulate intensity without depth, nature imposes real scale—a sense of something enduring, uncommodified, and beyond human control. This quality is essential in a time when artificial environments increasingly dominate perception. Awe derived from sublime nature thus provides not only an emotional tonic but a counterbalance to anthropocentrism, helping to anchor psychological resilience and reawaken humility before creation.

In sum, the psychology of awe reveals a profound and underutilized resource for mental health and spiritual clarity. As access to these natural experiences diminishes, the resulting deprivation may be as serious as any nutritional or sensory deficiency—impairing our ability to think clearly, feel compassionately, and live meaningfully.

3. Spiritual Impoverishment in an Age Without Stars

Long before the written word or formal doctrine, the night sky, mountains, forests, and seas spoke to humanity with a clarity that few other experiences could rival. In nearly every religious tradition, the sublimity of nature served not only as a backdrop to human life but as a primary vehicle for divine revelation. The stars

proclaimed order and majesty; the mountains whispered permanence; the oceans stirred both fear and awe. This sensuous, participatory relationship between human beings and the created world was not an optional supplement to religious belief—it was the source code of spiritual awareness. In the modern world, where light pollution obscures the heavens and artificial environments replace organic scale, we face an unprecedented condition: billions of people grow up without ever having seen the Milky Way or touched a snow-covered peak. The result is not just environmental or aesthetic loss but a deep spiritual impoverishment, a quiet starvation of the soul.

3.1 Historical Role of Natural Majesty in Religious Consciousness

Throughout human history, encounters with natural grandeur have been at the heart of sacred experience. The Hebrew Bible is steeped in this consciousness: Abraham is promised descendants "as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Genesis 15:5); Moses receives the law on a mountaintop enveloped in fire and cloud (Exodus 19); the Psalms proclaim, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1). In many indigenous traditions, mountains are ancestors, rivers are sentient, and stars are guides. Even in the early Christian tradition, nature was not seen as profane but as the first book of revelation, often referred to alongside Scripture itself. For the mystics, the desert was a place of purification, the forest a cathedral, the sea a mirror of divine depth. These settings cultivated spiritual attentiveness, training the soul to recognize the infinite within the finite.

3.2 Theological Implications of Living Under Artificial Skies

In contrast, today’s theological imagination increasingly operates within sealed systems—indoors, online, and bounded by screens. With the disappearance of the natural world from daily spiritual perception, theology risks becoming disembodied and abstract, divorced from the sensory and symbolic rhythms that once animated it. The artificial sky—ceiling lights, pixelated stars, ambient noise—does not inspire the same reverence or vulnerability as a real night under the cosmos. As a result, God becomes a concept rather than a presence, a doctrine rather than a mystery. This shift undermines one of theology’s most vital functions: to remind us that we are not at the center of the universe, but rather

creatures in relationship with something vast, wild, and good. In artificial settings, the divine often shrinks to fit human agendas. In creation, the divine expands the soul to fit the cosmos.

3.3 From Sinai to the Sea: The Symbolic Grammar of Geography in Scripture
Scripture is filled with landscapes that are not incidental but deeply symbolic and theologically charged. The mountain (Sinai, Horeb, Zion) is where the divine voice descends and covenant is made. The sea is chaos and transformation—crossed by Moses, tamed by Christ. The wilderness is where identity is stripped and faith refined. The garden is the site of original communion; the city, a site of exile and return. These geographies are spiritual grammars—each topological feature a metaphor and medium for divine encounter. Without direct experience of such landscapes, the symbolic world of Scripture becomes distant and flattened. One may read of the stars, the storm, or the desert, but without ever *feeling* them, their power wanes. Theology, like language, withers without reference. A generation that has never seen stars or heard silence may struggle to believe in either.

The spiritual consequences of an age without stars, then, are far-reaching. We risk raising not only ecologically indifferent citizens but metaphysically disoriented souls, unable to locate themselves in a meaningful order. To recover spiritual vitality, we must recover the physical conditions that train the heart to perceive the sacred. We must return to Sinai, to the shorelines, to the forest paths and alpine heights—not just for beauty, but for truth.

4. The Digital Surrogate: Why Simulated Nature Fails

In response to the increasing scarcity of wild places and natural awe, digital media has offered a well-intentioned substitute: high-resolution videos of starry skies, immersive virtual-reality treks through mountains, ambient soundtracks of tropical beaches. These tools promise convenience, accessibility, and a facsimile of wonder—but in truth, they fall devastatingly short. Screens can simulate imagery, but they cannot replicate the visceral, embodied, and metaphysical experience of

nature's majesty. The result is not only sensory deficiency but spiritual disorientation. The more we rely on digital surrogates for awe, the more we become accustomed to detached simulation over participatory encounter, trading real presence for curated illusions.

4.1 The Limitations of Screens and Virtual Immersion

Despite the sophistication of visual media, digital nature remains flat, passive, and ultimately consumable. A photograph of the Milky Way cannot replace the chill of night air, the instinctive craning of the neck, or the silence that descends as one peers into infinity. Virtual hikes lack gravity, fatigue, elevation change, and the micro-adjustments of breath and pace. Even the best VR headsets cannot replicate the smell of pine, the touch of soil, or the unpredictable light of a cloud-shadowed cliff. These missing dimensions matter. Embodied awe involves multisensory convergence and proprioceptive engagement—it reminds us we are creatures within a created world, not viewers of an artifact. Digital surrogates, by contrast, cast the viewer as a spectator outside of nature, reinforcing the illusion of separation that already plagues modern consciousness.

4.2 Doomscrolling, Overstimulation, and Narrative Fatigue

Worse still, the default posture toward screens today is not wonder, but anxiety and compulsion. Rather than inspire awe, most digital experiences condition a continuous flow of fragmented inputs: breaking news, social performance, ideological conflict, and advertising manipulation. This state—what has been called "narrative fatigue"—overloads our cognitive and emotional systems without providing depth, orientation, or relief. Doomscrolling, the compulsive consumption of negative information, leaves the user overstimulated but disempowered. The mind is active, but not open. The soul is burdened, but not moved. In contrast to nature's inherent rhythms, which invite stillness, recalibration, and humility, digital content is optimized for engagement without reflection, leaving users mentally saturated but spiritually undernourished.

4.3 Nature as Realignment: Silence, Scale, and Embodied Perspective

What digital immersion cannot replace is the realignment of consciousness that occurs in natural settings. A starry night invites silence not because it demands

attention, but because it dwarfs the ego into reverent quiet. A mountain hike reorders the body and mind through effort, exposure, and scale. A walk through a tropical forest demands attention to the now: birdcall, leaf texture, unexpected color. These experiences do not entertain; they orient. They strip away the contrivances of digital identity and remind the self of its place in something vastly older and more intricate. Nature, in this light, is not merely beautiful—it is therapeutic architecture. Its scale humbles, its rhythm heals, its unpredictability renews the imagination. And crucially, it resists commodification. One cannot scroll through a canyon or skip a sunrise. One must be there.

The spiritual and psychological danger of digital surrogacy lies not just in what it lacks, but in what it trains us to forget: that awe is not a media object but a lived encounter. Without regular immersion in unfiltered creation, the human soul atrophies into abstraction, consuming approximations of wonder while slowly forgetting what wonder feels like. The digital world, for all its marvels, cannot teach reverence. Only the real world can do that.

5. Civilizational Consequences of Awe Deprivation

The widespread loss of access to natural majesty—the night sky, the mountain horizon, the untamed ocean—has far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond the individual psyche. When awe disappears from public experience, entire cultures begin to lose proportion, clarity, and direction. What begins as a subtle psychological erosion accelerates into civilizational drift: ethical norms become untethered, narratives collapse into tribalism, and institutions no longer serve higher purposes but reflect the anxieties of the moment. At its deepest level, awe deprivation constitutes not merely an emotional absence but a cosmic dislocation—a forgetting of where we are, who we are, and what we are for. The symptoms of this loss are visible everywhere, from public discourse to private despair, from collapsing trust in institutions to rising extremism and ideological fragmentation.

5.1 Psychological Symptoms: Anxiety, Narcissism, Despair

The personal consequences of awe deprivation are increasingly documented in psychological literature. Individuals who lack experiences that instill a sense of vastness or transcendence are more prone to chronic anxiety, over-identification with ego, and feelings of isolation. Without a regular recalibration of perspective, the self becomes the default center of gravity. This hyper-centrality of the self breeds narcissism and fragility, because one's problems appear absolute and one's value becomes contingent on performance, visibility, or affirmation. At the same time, many who suffer from a secularized environment of relentless noise and visual saturation fall into existential despair—a condition marked not by pain but by the dull ache of meaninglessness. The human soul was not designed to bear the weight of its own significance without the relief of encountering something greater. Awe, by putting the self in cosmic context, provides precisely that relief.

5.2 Sociological Outcomes: Polarization, Spiritual Confusion

As individuals suffer the internal consequences of awe deprivation, societies begin to exhibit the external pathologies that follow: heightened polarization, ideological rigidity, and collective disorientation. Without common experiences that humble and unite—like watching the stars, climbing a mountain, or standing in reverent silence before natural power—populations begin to fracture. The shared sense of mystery and proportion that once allowed diverse people to inhabit a common world gives way to zero-sum narratives and grievance competition. Politics becomes not a negotiation of values, but a theater of self-assertion and identity panic. Religiously, the consequences are equally dire: spiritual confusion emerges not just from doctrinal disputes, but from the absence of any visceral experience of the sacred. Religion becomes either dogmatic performance or sentimental escape, rather than lived awe and cosmic responsibility. In this void, new pseudo-spiritual ideologies rise—technocratic utopianism, environmental apocalypticism, or tribal mysticism—all of which mimic the form of transcendence without its grounding reality.

5.3 Historical Parallels: The Fall of Cultures That Lost Cosmic Orientation

History offers sobering examples of what happens when civilizations lose their connection to the cosmos. In ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and even

Rome, early religious and civic institutions were intimately tied to astronomical observation, sacred geometry, and natural cycles. Temples were aligned with solstices, mythologies were mapped onto constellations, and law codes echoed the order perceived in the heavens. When these cultures began to turn inward—focusing more on human artifice than divine order—they entered periods of decadence, confusion, and collapse. In many cases, the loss of a shared cosmic story preceded political fragmentation and moral decay. Modern Western civilization, once deeply shaped by the Christian synthesis of natural awe and theological purpose, now stands at a similar precipice. The stars have been hidden. The mountains are commodified. The ocean is background noise. Without renewal, we risk repeating the fate of those who mistook technological power for existential orientation.

Awe, then, is not optional. It is a civilizational compass. Its absence leaves individuals unmoored, societies unstable, and traditions hollow. If we do not recover awe—if we do not restore the human relationship to grandeur, silence, and natural scale—our future will not merely be disenchanted. It will be unsustainable, both spiritually and structurally. Awe is not nostalgia for a pre-modern world; it is the prerequisite for any enduring future.

6. Proposals for Restoration

If the loss of awe is both a psychological deficit and a spiritual crisis, then its restoration must be approached with the same seriousness as public health campaigns or religious renewal. Awe must no longer be relegated to private vacations or abstract art appreciation—it must be reframed as an essential human nutrient, on par with clean air, education, or spiritual freedom. This restoration is not nostalgic; it is pragmatic. The recovery of awe is necessary for psychological well-being, ethical humility, and civilizational resilience. The proposals outlined in this section aim to make awe encounters not rare and accidental, but regular, intentional, and structurally supported across educational, religious, urban, and personal domains.

6.1 Natural Awe as a Public Health and Spiritual Resource

Awe should be recognized as a public health asset—an experience that measurably improves mental health, emotional regulation, pro-social behavior, and spiritual resilience. Just as access to green spaces has been correlated with reductions in depression and anxiety, so too has awe been shown to reduce inflammation, improve heart rate variability, and enhance mood and connectedness. Public health initiatives can integrate awe into wellness campaigns, reframing natural exposure not as leisure but as preventative medicine. On a spiritual level, awe serves to renew reverence, diminish ego-driven spiritual commodification, and reorient believers to the grandeur and mystery of divine creation. Ministries and mental health services alike can adopt awe-based practices—from guided nature exposure to contemplative skywatching—as low-cost, high-impact interventions for spiritual and psychological exhaustion.

6.2 Institutional Support: Churches, Schools, and Parks

Institutions play a critical role in the normalization and democratization of awe.

- Churches can reclaim their ancient relationship with the cosmos by incorporating awe into worship, liturgy, and retreat. Outdoor services, star vigils, mountaintop prayer walks, and creation-themed sermons can reconnect theology to lived cosmic experience.
- Schools can integrate awe-based pedagogy across disciplines: astronomy lessons that culminate in real stargazing; biology classes with fieldwork in forests and wetlands; literature courses that explore nature writing while immersed in the outdoors.
- Public parks and wilderness preserves should be expanded, protected, and deliberately oriented toward awe-centric experiences, with quiet zones, elevation lookouts, night-sky sanctuaries, and educational programming that frames these spaces as more than recreation—they are places of rehumanization.

  Together, these institutions can shift awe from private indulgence to public resource.

6.3 Monthly Awe-Sabbaths and Pilgrimage Practices

Awe must also be woven into the rhythms of modern life. One proposal is the institution of a monthly "Awe-Sabbath"—a day of digital disconnection and direct encounter with creation. On these days, individuals, families, and communities would abstain from screens and artificial environments to seek out a natural experience that evokes reverence: a forest hike, a beach at sunrise, a night under open stars. These practices, reinforced through community and ritual, could become spiritual reset points in an otherwise fragmented calendar.

In addition, the revival of pilgrimage practices—journeys not merely of tourism, but of transformation—can reintroduce the sacred geography of awe. These might include visits to mountain ranges, remote islands, ancient trees, or astronomical observatories. Unlike vacations, which often reinforce consumer logic, awe pilgrimages are about relinquishment, presence, and encounter. Religious and secular organizations alike could create structures to support and ritualize these journeys, recognizing them as formative rather than escapist.

6.4 Urban Planning for Reconnection: Star Zones, Silence Corridors, and Access Routes to Majesty

If cities are to remain livable and spiritually nourishing, they must accommodate portals to awe within their design. Urban planning can incorporate “star zones”—areas with reduced light pollution that allow for real stargazing, even in metropolitan regions. These might include rooftop observatories, sky-viewing terraces, or preserved dark parks at city edges.

“Silence corridors” could serve as green or blue pathways—lined with trees, water, or elevated walkways—designed for contemplative movement rather than transit. These corridors would invite solitude, reflection, and reconnection in daily life.

Most importantly, cities must preserve and enhance access routes to majesty: train lines to mountain ranges, ferries to island sanctuaries, trails to wilderness overlooks. These infrastructural commitments ensure that awe is not gated behind wealth or leisure time but made structurally available to all citizens. By integrating awe-access into zoning, transit, and recreation plans, urban centers can act as gateways rather than barriers to the sacred in nature.

In each of these proposals lies a single principle: awe is not accidental, and its absence is not benign. A culture that forgets how to feel reverence for the created world risks losing its ability to sustain justice, humility, and joy. Restoration requires intentional design—at the level of cities, institutions, and personal practice. Only by making awe ordinary again can we renew the extraordinary capacities of the human spirit.

7. Conclusion: Seeing Again

In a world increasingly shaped by artificial environments, digital saturation, and existential disorientation, the recovery of awe is not a peripheral concern—it is a civilizational imperative. We have reached a critical juncture where many people live their entire lives without seeing the Milky Way, climbing a mountain, or standing speechless before the power of the sea. The resulting fragmentation—of the psyche, the soul, and the society—cannot be healed by more information, consumption, or virtual simulation. What is needed is a return to what was once assumed: that to be human is to dwell in a world that is greater than oneself, and to be transformed by that greatness. This is the essence of awe. And awe, properly understood, is the first step toward seeing clearly again.

7.1 Awe as the Antidote to Fragmentation

Fragmentation is the condition of a culture that has lost the thread of meaning—a society split into niches of hyper-personalized reality, a populace pulled in every direction by stimuli but anchored by nothing. Awe counters this not by distraction but by integration. In the moment of true awe, whether under a vast sky or before a thundering waterfall, the individual becomes quiet—not silenced, but centered. The scattered self reassembles. The thousand anxious thoughts lose their urgency. The body reenters the moment. Awe gathers what fragmentation divides. Unlike entertainment, which distracts us from the chaos, or ideology, which seeks to organize it through control, awe transcends it through humility. It does not explain the world; it reintroduces us to it.

7.2 The Theology of Wonder: Humility, Gratitude, and Joy

At the heart of every authentic spiritual tradition lies a theology of wonder. Before doctrine, before ritual, there is the simple astonishment that anything exists at all—and that the world, while often terrifying and unjust, is also breathtakingly beautiful, intricate, and intelligible. Wonder is the spiritual posture that makes room for humility—because it shows us we are not the center. It invites gratitude—because it reveals how much is given without being earned. And it opens the soul to joy—because it reawakens the possibility that life is not merely survival, but invitation. When awe becomes regular in our lives, theology is no longer confined to creeds or categories. It becomes a relational awareness: of the Creator who sustains, the creation that dazzles, and the self who is called not to control, but to praise.

7.3 Toward a Civilization That Remembers What Is Vast

What would it mean to build a civilization that remembers what is vast? It would mean designing our cities not to exclude nature, but to frame it. It would mean measuring progress not only in GDP or bandwidth, but in access to starlight, silence, and scale. It would mean reeducating ourselves to perceive wonder not as an emotional indulgence, but as a structural necessity for moral and spiritual sanity. Such a civilization would not idolize nature nor flee into asceticism, but integrate reverence into the fabric of ordinary life. It would preserve awe for future generations not through museum glass or curated experiences, but through living encounter.

In the end, to see again is to remember who we are: not just consumers or citizens, but creatures in a shared cosmos, endowed with the capacity to wonder, to worship, and to be changed. Awe is not a retreat from the world's challenges. It is what equips us to face them without despair. It gives us back the sky, and with it, the soul.

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